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SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS NGO CRIES FOUL; ACCUSES INGOS OF MISTREATING
WORKERS IN NORTHERN UGANDA

¶1. (U) Summary: Human Rights Focus (HRF), a widely respected local human rights organization, reported the dissatisfaction of some Ugandans working for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in northern Uganda. In the report released in September 2007, workers reportedly complained of mistreatment and intimidation in the workplace and said that incidents of sexual and financial exploitation in the hiring process were prevalent. The report, however, does not specifically name individuals or organizations in connection with the alleged abuse. Several respected human rights advocates, international aid workers, and even one outspoken local politician have questioned the report's lack of supporting evidence, and cautioned against going after the INGOs. The GOU has remained largely silent on the issue since the press reports broke on October 29. While we do not believe there to be a widespread problem with workers' rights violations within the INGO community, the HRF stands firmly behind the report. End Summary.

HRF Report Causes Ripples

¶2. (U) Human Rights Focus (HRF) surprised the international non-governmental community (INGO) with allegations of worker and civil rights violations by INGOS in Gulu, northern Uganda in a September 2007 report. Local INGO workers interviewed for the report complained of "unfair" and "abusive" hiring practices, citing incidents of corruption, extortion, and sexual exploitation. The 55-page document, "Fostering the Transition in Acholiland: From War to Peace, from Camps to Home," dedicated only a few pages to the issue, but media coverage and discontent over the severity of the allegations and the lack of specific examples has overshadowed the report's primary focus.

¶3. (U) Local INGO employees told HRF that their foreign employers were often disrespectful and dismissive. They complained of low wages in comparison to their equally qualified foreign counterparts, poor working conditions, and a failure to comply with Ugandan labor laws. Attempts to raise concerns within the unnamed INGOS have been met with warnings or even termination of employment, the report alleged. The HRF noted, however, that unspecified steps were taken by some INGOS to create a more inclusive and positive work environment.

¶4. (U) The "most directly exploitive and abusive" were the high-ranking Ugandan male INGO workers who often demand financial and sexual favors as compensation for employment, the report alleges. Personnel changes and informational campaigns, according to the report, have helped to reduce the number of more egregious cases. Some evangelical INGOS reportedly demanded that employees alter their religious belief for employment.

¶5. (U) The report called for more local government involvement and support, specifically urging Gulu District Chairman Norbert Mao to intervene. Greater support from local NGOs and the Gulu District

Forum was also mentioned as avenues for protecting INGO workers' rights.

Gulu District Chairman Seeks Clarification

¶16. (SBU) Outspoken Gulu District Chairman Norbert Mao admitted to EmbOff on November 6 that he had not read the report, but noted that he was aware of prior reports that some faith-based INGOs implemented a "do what you are told" policy in the north. He said that the report's lack of details had unfairly "demoralized" the entire INGO community, and vowed to meet with the INGO community to discuss the allegations. The NGOs must operate within the confines of Ugandan law, Mao affirmed.

NGO Community Questions Validity of Report

¶17. (SBU) The former Gulu-based coordinator for the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA), Esteban Saco, questioned the validity of the report in a November 13 meeting with EmbOff. Saco said that the report was vague, and lacked the statistical data needed to give scope to the alleged problem. He dismissed the possibility of a widespread pattern of abuse, adding that he had not heard of any major workers' rights violations in the INGO community during his tenure in Gulu. Saco said that INGO representatives in Gulu shared his concerns over the report, but added that the GOU had not pushed the issue. Gulu District Chairman Mao, however, had raised the issue and was reportedly investigating the claims, he commented.

¶18. (SBU) Foundation for Human Rights Initiative Executive Director Livingstone Ssewanyana called the report "biased" and "one-sided".

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He said that it was not constructive, and that he had urged policymakers to investigate the charge fully before taking action. UNICEF Child Protection Office Chief Cornelius Williams, a Sierra Leonean national with extensive experience in the north, agreed with Ssewanyana. He expressed concern that the report might undermine "legitimate" human rights work in the region. Williams said that abuse was unlikely in the "larger more established" INGOs, but suggested that such activity might have occurred in the lesser known entities.

¶19. (SBU) Father Carlos Rodriguez, a Catholic priest with 18-years of experience in the north, was also concerned over the report's lack of detail on specific incidents of abuse. He said that there were a number of reliable INGOs working in the region, both faith-based and secular, whose activities might be unfairly scrutinized. Father Rodriguez noted, however, that some organizations "take advantage" of the poor, and stressed the need for a common ethical code of conduct within the NGO community.

HRF Stands Behind Report

¶10. (SBU) HRF Executive Director James Otto in a November 15 meeting with EmbOff stood firmly behind the accusations made in the September report. Otto expressed his disappointment that the INGO criticism overshadowed the more important issue of getting northern Ugandans home from IDP camps. He admitted that HRF struggled with whether it would be prudent to include the criticism in the report, but said that if HRF had not raised the issue, "who would?" Otto did not give EmbOff the names of the organizations or individuals believed to be involved in the alleged activity, but said that he would help us to investigate further by talking directly to individuals who had made the accusations. "You will be shocked by some of the accounts of sexual and financial exploitation," Otto affirmed.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) There is no indication of a widespread pattern of gross civil and worker rights violations by INGOs operating in northern Uganda. Though Otto would not share the names of his sources, his credibility and dedication in the North lends weight to his concerns, and merits our consideration. Meanwhile, the GOU has remained largely silent on the HRF report, even though it has its own concerns about INGOs and NGOs in the north. End Comment.
CHRITTON